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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teaching profession has made discoveries about teaching beginning or low-level adult learners (those with little or no schooling in their native languages, learners who may not be familiar with the Roman alphabet, those with learning disabilities, and those literate in their native languages but who wish a slower-paced class and would benefit from literacy-class activities). Assessment or screening can be made orally or through reading, writing, or classroom observation. Classroom techniques and approaches that relate directly to student needs and involve students actively are found most effective. They include: building on students' personal experiences; using students as resources; sequencing activities from less to more challenging; building redundancy into the curriculum; combining enabling skills with language experience and whole-language approaches; combining life-skill reading competencies with phonics, word recognition, word order, word spacing, reading words in context, and reading comprehension; using cooperative/interactive learning activities; and varying techniques for diverse learning styles. Instructional materials might consist of realia, flash cards, pictures or phonographs, tape recorder and cassette tapes, overhead projector and video player with related materials, a pocket chart, alphabet sets, camera, games, index cards, manipulatives, children's literature, and art supplies. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Teaching Low-Level Adult ESL Learners

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Prior to the late 1970's, instructional methods and materials for adults learning English as a second language (ESL) assumed the presence of literacy in a first language (Wrigley & Guth, 1992). After 1975 the United States experienced an influx of refugees from Southeast Asia. Many had minimal or no experience in reading and writing in their native languages and, as the learners joined ESL classes, educators saw that existing methods and materials were not appropriate for these learners. Ten years later, during the implementation of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), educators were again faced with teaching adult learners who had little or no schooling in their native countries.

What has the field learned about offering instruction to literacy level (low or beginning) adult ESL learners? This digest provides information on how to identify and assess the instructional needs of adults learning to become literate in a second language; it discusses general techniques that facilitate instruction for these learners; it provides a sample procedure for combining some of these techniques; and it describes classroom materials appropriate for low-level adult ESL learners.

Low-Level Learners

There are several categories of adult ESL learners who can benefit from the approaches and techniques used in instruction for low-level learners (Crystal, 1982; California Department of Education, 1992; Savage, 1993). These categories include the following:

- learners who are nonliterate and have had little or no prior schooling in their native language;
- learners, such as speakers of Chinese, Arabic, or Khmer, who may not be familiar with the Roman alphabet;
- learners who may have learning disabilities; and
- learners who are literate in their native language but who may want (for various reasons such as age, health, family situation) to participate in a slower-paced class and who would benefit from classroom activities that characterize a literacy class.

Assessing the Needs of Low-Level Learners

Assessing the needs of learners who may not speak even minimal English and may not read or write in any language can be difficult. Holt (1994), Crystal (1982), and Bell (1988) offer suggestions, recommending a variety of ways to assess learners orally, through reading and writing, and through classroom observation.

Assessing Orally

Educators who speak the native language of the adult learners should ask them about their educational backgrounds. Persons with three or fewer years of formal education will probably be nonliterate.

Assessing Through Reading

Reading readiness tasks can be used for literacy screening. For example, learners can be asked to complete the following tasks. (The literacy skills being assessed appear in parentheses.)

- Complete an alphabet cloze (for example, A B ___ D ___ F G H ___ J), supplying the missing letters. (familiarity with Roman alphabet)
- Copy a sentence. (speed and ease in forming words)
- Read two simple sentences. (basic sight vocabulary in context)
- Point to letters corresponding to the sounds made by the teacher. (simple consonant sounds not easily confused)
- Read several unfamiliar or nonsense words. (blending sounds)

A learner who can recognize basic sight words or use a knowledge of phonics to approximate the sounds of unfamiliar words probably does not need basic literacy instruction.

Assessing Through Writing

The completion of a simple application form on which learners are asked to fill in basic information such as name, address, phone number, date, social security number, birth date, birthplace, age, and gender is a quick way to determine reading and writing ability, especially when a large number of learners have to be assessed in a short period of time. Someone who has difficulty filling out the form could probably benefit from basic literacy instruction.

A writing sample in the learner's first language is useful in determining the literacy level of the learner in his or her native language.

A writing sample in English, done at intake, can be used to compare later writing samples and to monitor the progress of each learner's writing.

Assessing Through Classroom Observation

Informal assessment through classroom observation can continue to assist the teacher in determining an individual learner's needs. Attention should be paid to how learners hold their pencils (awkwardly? too tightly?) and their books (upside down?), how they move their eyes (Do the eyes move to follow words?), how quickly they write (Do they hesitate? take time? labor over each letter?), and how they interact in large and small groups (Do they offer to help each other? Are they comfortable in groups?).

Techniques for Working With Adults

Knowles and other educators maintain that adult education is most effective when it is "experience centered, related to learners' real needs, and directed by learners themselves" (Auerbach, 1992, p. 14). Bell and Burnaby (1984), Holt (1988), Holt and Gaer (1993), and Wrigley and Guth (1992) list techniques that involve beginning level learners as active participants in selecting topics, language, and materials.

1. Build on the experiences and language of learners. Invite them to discuss their experiences and provide activities that will allow them to generate language they have already developed.
2. Use learners as resources. Ask them to share their knowledge and expertise with others in the class.
3. Sequence activities in an order that moves from less challenging to more challenging, such as progressing from listening to speaking, reading, and writing skills. Move from language experience activities to picture-word connections to all-print exercises.

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4. Build redundancy into curriculum content, providing repetition of topics. This will help overcome problems related to irregular attendance common in adult classes.
5. Combine enabling skills (visual discrimination of letters and words, auditory discrimination of sounds and words, spacing between letters and words, letter-sound correspondences, blending letters to sound out words, sight vocabulary) with language experience and whole language approaches.
6. Combine life-skill reading competencies (reading medicine labels, writing notes to the children's teachers, filling out forms) with phonics, word recognition, word order, spacing words in a sentence, reading words in context, and reading comprehension.
7. Use cooperative learning activities that encourage interaction by providing learners with situations in which they must negotiate language with partners or group members to complete a task (See Bell, 1988).
8. Include a variety of techniques to appeal to diverse learning styles. For example, merge holistic reading approaches such as language experience with discrete approaches such as phonics.

An Integrated Approach to Literacy Instruction

The language experience approach (LEA)—which uses learner experiences as lesson content—is a way to introduce multiple activities that appeal to learners' diverse backgrounds and preferred learning styles while offering instruction in language that is both comprehensible and interesting (Taylor, 1992). The following is an example of a modified LEA lesson that could be used with low-level learners.

1. A shared experience, such as a field trip, a common situation, or a meaningful picture is a stimulus for class discussion.
2. Learners volunteer sentences about the experience and the teacher writes the sentences on the chalkboard.
3. The teacher reads each sentence aloud, running her finger under words as each is pronounced, verifying that she has written what the student has said.
4. When the story is completed, the teacher reads it aloud.
5. Learners are encouraged to join in a second and third reading of the story.
6. A number of activities can follow at this point:
   - Learners copy the story;
   - Learners underline all the parts they can read;
   - Learners circle specific words (e.g., words that begin with a designated sound, common sight words such as *the*);
   - Choral cloze: The teacher erases some words, reads the story, and asks learners to supply the missing words;
   - Writing cloze: The teacher types the story, leaving out every fifth word. During the next class the teacher passes out the cloze and asks learners to fill in the missing words;
   - Scrambled sentences: The teacher types the story. During the next class the teacher distributes copies of the story to the class. Each learner cuts the story into strips so that there is one sentence on each strip of paper. Learners scramble the sentences and rearrange them in the proper sequence;
   - Scrambled words: More advanced learners can cut sentences into words, scramble the words, and rearrange them in order.

Selecting Appropriate Classroom Materials

Using concrete but age-appropriate materials with adult learners enhances instruction by providing a context for language and literacy development. A basic kit of materials might consist of the following objects, games, and materials.

1. Realia: clocks, food items, calendars, plastic fruits and vegetables, maps, household objects, real and play money, food containers, abacus, manual for learning to drive, and classroom objects;
2. Flash cards: pictures, words, and signs;
3. Pictures or photographs: personal, magazine, and others;
4. Tape recorder and cassette tapes, including music for imagery and relaxation;
5. Overhead projector, transparencies, and pens; video player and videos;
6. Pocket chart for numbers, letters, and pictures;
7. Alphabet sets;
8. Camera for language experience stories—to create biographies and autobiographies;
9. Games such as bingo and concentration: commercial or teacher-made;
10. Colored index cards to teach word order in sentences, to show when speakers change in dialogue, to illustrate question/answer format, and to use as cues for a concentration game;
11. Cuisenaire rods to teach word order in sentences, to use as manipulatives in dyad activities, and to teach adjectives;
12. Colored chalk to teach word order, to differentiate between speakers in a dialogue, and to illustrate question and answer format;
13. Poster, butcher, and construction paper;
14. Felt-tipped pens, colored pencils, and crayons;
15. Scissors, glue, and masking tape; and
16. Children's literature: for learning techniques for reading or telling stories to children (See Smallwood, 1992, for ideas on using children's literature with adults.).

Conclusion

Providing instruction to adults acquiring ESL literacy is a challenge. When approaches, techniques, and materials are suitable for adults, are related to their real needs, and promote involvement in their own learning, there is a greater chance of success.

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